

“The Gift of Friendship”

John 15:9-17

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My text for this morning comes from John 15, in the middle of Jesus’s Farewell Discourse to his disciples. This is where after having their last meal together, our Lord tries to reinforce certain lessons he had shared with them over their previous three and half years. The time has finally come for him to leave. He must confront that which he had spent his entire life preparing himself for- his Passion on a cross. By the same time tomorrow, he will be dead. In a matter of hours, he is to be arrested, tried and found guilty on the twin charges of blasphemy and sedition, that is, inciting insurrection against the Roman Empire. His punishment for this will be crucifixion alongside two OTHER criminals, the most terrifying form of execution in the ancient world. However, far from abandoning them, he will soon confer upon them his personal spirit- the Holy Spirit, who will take up residency in their hearts and from henceforth will lead them into all truth, even as HE had done during their travels together. Christ will thus make their hearts his NEW home and never again will they be separated from either his presence or his love. And so in those waning hours in that Upper Room, the bulk of his final remarks are here centered on what has been his main theme since the very OUTSET of his ministry- love and its manifestation in and through the gift of friendship.

Throughout the writings of the church, the SIGNIFICANCE of friendship is regarded as almost as important as one’s RELATIONSHIP TO GOD. The 6th century Pope Gregory the Great viewed the Christian life as a pilgrimage on which Christians were able to glimpse the face of God through their friends as they journey together towards the heavenly kingdom. Aelred of Rievaulx was a 12th century English abbot who wrote extensively on the importance of spiritual friendship, claiming that “he who abides in friendship abides in God and God in him” and even going so far to state that “God IS friendship.” St. Francis de Sales, a beloved Bishop in the Catholic Church who was later canonized as a Saint for his deep piety, described true Christian friendship as the “bond of perfection.”

One of the most common verbs of “love” in the Greek is *phileo*, and the Greek word for friend, *philos*, comes from this verb. In the New Testament, a “friend” is immediately understood as “one who loves.” In the Gospel of John, friendship is for Jesus the ULTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER. Here in John 15, Jesus establishes himself as both the MODEL and SOURCE of true friendship. As the MODEL of friendship, he calls the disciples to love even as HE has loved; as the SOURCE of friendship, he makes possible their own friendship through what he has given them. His commandment to his disciples is that they are to LOVE EACH OTHER EVEN AS HE HAS LOVED THEM, and that GREATER love has no one than he who WILLINGLY LAYS DOWN HIS (OR HER) LIFE FOR ANOTHER. This was never more powerfully demonstrated than when he voluntarily surrendered his life to that cross for the sins of the world- a sacrifice NO LESS made on behalf of Judas, the disciple who betrayed him, as well as those directly responsible for putting him to death in the FIRST place- the religious and political leaders of that day. Our Lord’s entire life represented the very fulfillment of this ethic.

If “friendship” is understood to be another term for “love,” then those QUALITIES OF LOVE which are enumerated by the Apostle Paul in the thirteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthian church--his famous “love chapter”—are also the SAME qualities demonstrated by one’s friendship with another. Then a REAL friend is never envious or boastful or arrogant. A friend is not rude, that is, always insisting on his own way first. Neither is a friend always irritable or resentful. A friend doesn’t rejoice when another does wrong but rather rejoices when he or she is in the right. Like love, true friendship “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.”

By commanding his followers to adopt and live by that very same ethic in their OWN lives, Jesus is saying that such a love is not unique to HIMSELF. Rather, ANYONE who would claim to be a follower of his CAN and MUST LOVE to the same extreme as HE does. They are his friends only to the extent they are willing to lay down their OWN lives on behalf of someone else even as HE will voluntarily lay down HIS life for the benefit of the ENTIRE WORLD. As the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, it was now THEIR turn to demonstrate that they were a friend TO HIM by doing the same. Jesus says that if they do what he asks them to do, then they prove by their actions that they are INDEED his friends. In fact, the RELATIONSHIP ITSELF is TOTALLY TRANSFORMED so that it is no longer one in which Christ is the superior one and his disciples, merely his subordinate followers. Instead, it becomes a relationship AS BETWEEN EQUALS which is how REAL friendships OUGHT to be conducted.

In other words, when in obedience to Christ they fulfill his command to love others even as he has loved them, with a love that includes a willingness to sacrifice their OWN lives for another, even if the other is an ENEMY of theirs, then their entire relationship suddenly changes. It is no longer one in which he, Jesus, is their Master and they, his deferential and submissive students. Their relationship is such that Christ and his disciples are NOW “MUTUAL FRIENDS” and “FULL PARTNERS” in ministry together- a relationship that could ONLY be realized through their mutual love for each other and for the world! I can’t emphasize enough that when Jesus calls his followers his “friends,” he is declaring to them that the old relationship between them is no more, that where Jesus was their Commanding General who issued them their marching orders and they were his lowly foot soldiers, merely carrying out his directives, an entirely NEW relationship now exists between them. They have become his “friends” and such friendship bespeaks of a relationship as between equals, as mutual partners in ministry founded upon a depth and breadth of love the world had never before seen. It is TRULY one of the most RADICAL AND EXTRAORDINARY STATEMENTS in all the Bible!

The practice of friendship has everything to do with evangelism and church growth. Studies show that the vast majority of people who attend church do so BECAUSE of friends, that if you were to eliminate friendship from the picture, you would eliminate most church growth. Every church wants to be known as the friendly church because it is a known fact that friendship is the SOURCE of most growth. If a church is NOT friendly, it will not grow. Dr. Wilbur Chapman did a study of the people who were healed by Jesus and he found this same truth. Of the forty specific people Jesus healed of a disease, thirty-four of them were brought to Jesus by friends, or he was brought to them by friends; in only six cases did people come on their own. The point is, people do come on their own to Christ and the church, but the VAST MAJORITY

come because of FRIENDS. The most likely way ANY Christian is going to touch another life for Christ is by means of FRIENDSHIP.

One week from tomorrow, I'll be on a plane heading to Reno, Nevada to meet up with a group of guys I have known for well over forty years. MOST of us attended college together but we ALL graduated from the same seminary at the same time. Since then, we've served Presbyterian congregations from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to California and Idaho as well as points in-between. Thirty years ago, one of the group—Larry--developed Hodgkin's Disease (a cancer of the lymph glands) and was given less than a 10% chance of survival. During his illness, I and another of our friends flew out to California to see him and we were shocked to see how all his hair had fallen out and his face had ballooned to the size of a watermelon from all the steroids he was on. When we left him that afternoon, we honestly believed it was going to be the last time we would ever see him alive. However, his sister is a medical doctor and she was able to get him into one of the finest hospitals on the West Coast where an experimental treatment for the disease was underway. It ended up saving his life. A decade later, he developed prostate cancer which he AGAIN recovered from and which has only recently reappeared. I've told him many times how he has more lives than a cat and will probably outlive us ALL!

Realizing how we weren't growing any younger, the five of us decided that sooner than later, we needed to be more intentional about getting together and doing so on a regular basis. Therefore, we covenanted amongst ourselves that each year we would devote one week of our vacation to do just that. More than the typical reunion where people might meet to just drink and socialize, we wanted it to be a SPECIAL time- one for providing emotional encouragement but ALSO SPIRITUAL SUPPORT to one another. This year will be the twentieth such gathering and we've rented a house through AirBnB for the occasion. We're not shy about telling one another that we love each other and over the years, I can honestly say that I've grown closer to these guys than I am with my own twin brother.

Over the years, perhaps the GREATEST lesson I have ever learned is that God's GREATEST gifts have always come to us in the form of OTHER HUMAN BEINGS. God so loved Adam he gave Eve. Accordingly, God so loved THE WORLD that he gave his only-begotten Son. You may have heard how two weeks ago, some anonymous person in California won the Powerball jackpot- an astounding \$700 million dollars. When I think of the different people who've become a part of my life over the years—people of varying temperaments, intellects, and interests including those in the various congregations I've served--I feel RICHER and MORE BLESSED than any lottery winner. These have been relationships, not founded on using or taking advantage of each other, but relationships based on mutual love and respect and that's a gift you can NEVER place a price tag on!

It's often said how all the money and success in the WORLD cannot guarantee happiness nor assuage the loneliness that people feel inside themselves and it's so true. This past week, I read an interview with the singer Chaka Khan who was a very close friend and confidant of the musician Prince. In it, she remarked how Prince, who died five years ago from what was determined to be a drug overdose, was a terribly lonely individual. She said, "It might surprise people to know that Prince was a very lonely person. I don't know if it showed, but he was very lonely." But Prince was no isolated case. This pandemic which has ravaged so many lives around the world has helped to underscore how there is ANOTHER scourge we are all having to

contend with- AN EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS. According to the findings from *Make Caring Common*, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an alarming number of Americans, especially YOUNG Americans between the age of 18 and 25, are profoundly lonely and have grown INCREASINGLY so throughout the course of this outbreak. Ironically, people are ALSO discovering that the more hours they spend on Facebook and other social media which are supposedly a means for connecting the social lives of people, the LONELIER they are becoming. Regardless of one's age, loneliness increases the risks of a whole host of problems, including depression, anxiety, heart disease, and substance abuse. Nursing home patients have been especially susceptible as more than 35% of all coronavirus deaths in the US have been linked to their confinement in such care facilities. Many of them haven't died from covid as much as the isolation and lack of contact with their loved ones created by the lockdowns. Thus, a second irony is how the very isolation that is supposed to protect them has instead helped contribute to their deaths.

The New Yorker magazine published an article a few months back which I had to read twice because I thought it was that bizarre. It told of how older citizens are now relying on robotic pets to help assuage the loneliness they feel. Little dogs and cats made out of plastic and covered with realistic fur have been programmed with computer chips to respond to people's social needs. One made by the Ageless Innovation Company greets its owner with over one hundred variations of "Good morning!" Like Alexa, the virtual assistant technology created by Amazon which most of us have on our home computer, it creates a personality profile of the person through repeated interaction and machine learning. The robot determines how "adventurous" one is then recommends certain activities for the individual to perform such as doing a short meditation or a seated exercise. It is programmed to engage its owner with small talk. Sometimes, the person will tell the robot how much he or she loves it and the robotic animal will respond by saying, "Thank you, that makes my lights shine brighter," or "Stop saying that! It will cause my processor to overheat." It's not too farfetched to think that in a few short years, instead of artificial cats and dogs, we'll be seeing HUMANOID robots with perfect human appearances providing the companionship people desperately crave but can't find from other human beings.

My friends, and I count EACH of you my friend, I can't think of anything MORE sad than someone who confesses that he or she hasn't a real friend in the world- no one to care for them unconditionally, no one they could contact in the event of an emergency, no one to call them on their birthday or send them a card at Christmas time. I'll never forget one particular sermon the dean of my college preached in chapel one weekday. He had spent a major part of his life as a pastor and family counselor and he said this, "Ninety percent of the problems most people have in the world would disappear if only they had an ear to speak to- a friend who was willing to simply sit down and listen to their troubles and not be judgmental about them."

Well that's what the CHURCH was INTENDED TO BE- an infirmary for the sick and dying! This place is meant to be a HOSPITAL while the pews we currently sit in are the sick beds for the lonely and hurting and wounded to occupy. That's why Jesus said he had expressly come for those in need of a doctor for he understood how only those who were sick or wounded would ever come to him and accept the wholeness and health he offered. If the church is intended to be an Urgent Care where people can find healing for all their brokenness, then WE— ALL of us--become the nurses and caregivers who look after them in their condition, ministering to them from out of our OWN brokenness and need. The great tragedy is that so many churches

refuse to recognize themselves as such. Instead, they like to imagine themselves more along the lines of a FANCY COUNTRY CLUB that only accepts persons as rich and successful as they might be, or a FORMAL MUSEUM where they can put all their righteousness and good deeds on display for all to see in order to make themselves feel better or superior to everyone else. They fail to heed perhaps the most important lesson Jesus ever shared with his followers, how in “the Last Day”--the Day of Judgment—only those who ministered to him personally by offering him food and shelter and clothing when he had none, who cared for him when he was sick or befriended him while in prison- only THESE would ever enter his kingdom and receive the inheritance they were due. Confused by this, his followers asked, “But when did we see you lacking such basic necessities and we stepped forward to provide them for you?” He replied, “Whatsoever you did for the most wretched among your brothers or sisters, you ALSO did for ME.” By extending the gift of love and friendship to lonely and hurting people all around us with a gift every one of us is MORE than an equipped to offer, we demonstrate that we are not only friends with Christ, but that THEY TOO can enjoy that SAME friendship we found so rewarding and so fulfilling when WE first encountered him.

As I close, I leave you with one last story which sums up for me what I believe TRUE friendship is all about. Out of the furnaces of war come many true stories of sacrificial friendship. One such story tells of two friends in World War I, who were inseparable. They had enlisted together, trained together, were shipped overseas together and fought side-by-side in the trenches. During an attack, one of the men was critically wounded in a field filled with barbed wire obstacles, and he was unable to crawl back to his foxhole. The entire area was under a withering enemy crossfire, and it was suicidal to try to reach him. Yet his friend decided to try. Before he could get out of his own trench, the sergeant yanked him back inside and ordered him not to go. “It’s too late. You can’t do him any good and you’ll only get yourself killed.”

A few minutes later, the officer turned his back, and instantly the man was gone after his friend. A short while later, he staggered back, mortally wounded, with his friend, now dead, in his arms. The sergeant was both angry and deeply moved. “What a waste,” he blurted out. “He’s dead and you’re dying. It just wasn’t worth it.” With almost his last breath, the dying man replied, “Oh, yes, it was, Sarge. When I got to him, the only thing he said was, ‘I knew you’d come, Jim!’”

What our Lord said to his disciples, he NO LESS says to US this morning: “You are my friends if you do as I command. I no longer call you servants...Instead I have called you FRIENDS.” Yes, Jesus Christ IS our friend- “our friend to the end.” BY DECLARING US HIS FRIENDS, we are no longer mere followers but “MUTUAL PARTNERS” with him in ministry. AS OUR FRIEND, he has bequeathed to us his Holy Spirit- HIS spirit, who has made our heart his home and from which he helps direct our steps and guides us into all truth. AS OUR FRIEND, he promises us again and again that he will never leave or forsake us, EVER, that like that dying soldier, WE TOO have uttered not once but again and again, “I knew you’d come, Jesus! I knew you’d come.” You see, that’s what a REAL friend DOES and because we know it to be true, may it inspire US to be just as great a friend to OTHERS who may be lost and lonely and in need of a friend, just as WE once were! Amen and amen.